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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 ASHGABAT 000618

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN'S PRESIDENT BERDIMUHAMMEDOV TELLS SCA
DAS FEIGENBAUM TO "MAKE IT REAL"

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.4
(B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) During a cordial 80-minute meeting on June 25, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov told SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary Evan Feigenbaum that Turkmenistan was committed to expanded cooperation with the United States. He stated that a Trans-Caspian pipeline (TCP) remained on Turkmenistan's agenda. During the meeting Berdimuhammedov also demonstrated some lingering naivete regarding the way things worked in the real world. Berdimuhammedov claimed there had been "only words and theory" so far in building the TCP and supplying electricity to Afghanistan. "Where's the pipeline?" he asked, "We've been talking it for six months, we need to make it real." He put the blame for the lack of an energy agreement for Afghanistan on the slow pace of energy line construction on the Afghan side of the border, rather than on the two sides' inability to reach a deal on the power purchase agreement (PPA). DAS Feigenbaum and Berdimuhammedov engaged in a friendly philosophical debate about whether economics could be separated from law and politics. When Feigenbaum noted that rule of law was important to both the investment and political climate, Berdimuhammedov said Turkmenistan took a "practical" approach -- let's just do projects and sell gas. DAS Feigenbaum pushed him hard on the need for movement on human rights and political development; Berdimuhammedov said such changes could not be immediate because of the "mentality" of Turkmenistan's people. He said the two sides agreed on the goal but differed on approaches. Berdimuhammedov was receptive, however, when Feigenbaum suggested expanded dialogue and exchanges on human rights and democracy, including judicial, law enforcement and legal/legislative training. In a later meeting, Deputy Chairman of Foreign Affairs Meredov, who had attended the Berdimuhammedov meeting, called Feigenbaum's attention to the president's openness to dialogue on democracy and human rights. Berdimuhammedov agreed in principle to Feigenbaum's suggestion that he attend the opening of the U.S.-built Imamnazar border crossing checkpoint station on August 13 as

a symbolic gesture of the two leaders' commitment to improved bilateral relations. Feigenbaum conveyed invitations to Meredov, the ministers of health and education, and the Mayor of Ashgabat to visit the United States and welcomed the president's decision to send his finance and economics minister to the upcoming U.S.-Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement meeting. End Summary.

Berdimammedov Praises Expanding Relationship

12. (C) Berdimammedov opened the meeting by noting that this was the latest in a series of several visits -- including by SCA Assistant Secretary Boucher, SCA PDAS Mann and CENTCOM Commander Admiral Fallon -- that had helped to further develop the bilateral relationship. The two sides had jointly carried out programs -- mainly in education -- and Turkmenistan wanted to cooperate on economic and trade issues as well.

The U.S. View of Its Bilateral Relationship

13. (C) Feigenbaum recalled that the last time he visited, just two and a half weeks after President Niyazov's death, the president had just received a condolence message from Secretary of State Rice expressing a wish to turn the page on

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the relationship. The two sides had had the opportunity to do "more in the last 16 weeks than in the last 16 years" in improving bilateral relations. The United States had been a strong supporter of Turkmenistan's sovereignty and independence since the country's founding. Although there had been much discussion in the media about a rivalry in the region among outside powers, such discussion missed the

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point; the main U.S. goal was to help Turkmenistan and its neighbors realize their potential. As he had almost six months earlier with Deputy Chairman for Foreign Affairs Meredov, Feigenbaum also stated that, while there had been good relations between the two countries, there had also been difficulties. On his previous visit, Feigenbaum had spent many long hours talking with Meredov about the bilateral relationship. Summarizing his presentation to Meredov (ref a), Feigenbaum stated that there had been successful cooperation in many areas, including in strengthening Turkmenistan's borders, broadening cooperation on Afghanistan, promoting overflight cooperation and the fine work done by Peace Corps volunteers in Turkmenistan. Feigenbaum said the United States was proud of the countries' work in these areas, which had been mutually beneficial.

14. (C) Likewise, Feigenbaum had told Meredov in January that there were many areas -- education, trade and health -- where there was great potential for cooperation, but where that potential had not been fully realized. In addition, there were areas of difference. These included human rights and political development; but we should aim to turn these areas of difference into a positive in the bilateral relationship. The United States wanted to work with Turkmenistan on civil society development, media, opportunities for people to participate in the social life of the country, and in promoting freedom of religious belief.

Proposed Next Steps

15. (C) Noting the potential for development in every area, Feigenbaum suggested that the two countries should expand cooperation in the areas of agreement, while seeking to further address areas where there were differences in a spirit of mutual respect. With that goal, the United States had sent five delegations representing almost every area of the relationship -- security, energy, trade, education and

culture, and Afghanistan -- to Turkmenistan over the last six months. As agreed, the United States planned to send delegations on economic and business development and agriculture, as well as political development and human rights. These delegations had offered an opportunity for U.S. officials to explore what might be possible in future relations. And, in fact, the delegations had identified lots of good areas for cooperation. The challenge was in implementation. Over the next six months, the United States wanted to see a two-way flow of visitors -- Turkmenistan officials traveling to the United States, as well as more U.S. visitors coming to Turkmenistan. With this goal in mind, Feigenbaum proposed three next steps:

-- Secretary Rice invited Foreign Affairs Deputy Chairman Meredov to Washington;

-- The United States hoped for additional opportunities to interact with those ministries -- education, health and economy and finance -- in areas where there was the greatest potential. To this end, the United States welcomed visits by Turkmenistan's ministers in these areas. Feigenbaum noted that the Minister of Economy and Finance had already been approved to participate in the annual Trade Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) meetings in Washington in July, and added that the United States would facilitate bilateral meetings for the minister in addition to the TIFA meeting. The United States would also welcome a visit by the Mayor of Ashgabat to Albuquerque to follow up on the two cities' sister city relations;

-- The United States also wanted to continue visits directed toward broadening dialogue, including in those areas where the two countries had differences, such as democracy and human rights.

Berdimammedov's Priorities

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16. (C) Thanking the United States for its support for Turkmenistan's sovereignty and independence, Berdimammedov agreed that the two sides had put together the skeleton of a new relationship, but there were still areas where cooperation needed to be reviewed or accelerated. Specifically, Berdimammedov raised:

-- Foreign Relations. Berdimammedov claimed his position on foreign relations was unchanged from the position he had expressed during his presidential campaign: consistent with Turkmenistan's neutrality policy, he supported broadening fraternal, bilateral relations on an economic basis, with no politicization of issues.

-- Energy. Berdimammedov had discussed energy issues with both Assistant Secretary Boucher and PDAS Mann. The TCP would not be taken off the agenda. Berdimammedov added that, if the TCP were to move forward, he wanted to see U.S. companies involved; Chevron had expressed interest in such an arrangement. Returning later to this topic, however, the president complained, "We've been talking for six months about TCP; where is the pipeline? We need to make it real."

-- Afghanistan: The president thanked the United States for showing a concern toward Afghanistan that even Afghanistan's neighbors did not show. Turkmenistan wanted Afghanistan to prosper and, to that end, had rendered assistance and planned to provide additional economic assistance to its neighbor.

-- Education. Turkmenistan wanted to raise the standard of its own education system, drawing on the experience of American and European schools. Turkmenistan appreciated the many exchange programs that the United States offered, and hoped to increase the number of slots in higher education exchange programs, particularly in the areas of finance,

legal issues, oil and gas, and town planning and architecture. Turkmenistan also wanted to invite U.S. professors to teach in Turkmenistan's institutions of higher learning.

-- Human Rights. While there had been "positive results" already in human rights areas, resolution of problems could not come immediately because of the "mentality" of Turkmenistan's people.

In general, Berdimuhammedov concluded, cooperation needed to be expanded, but he told Feigenbaum he and Meredov should inventory the relationship in their meeting.

Turkmenistan Eager to Continue Afghan Cooperation

17. (C) Feigenbaum expressed pleasure that Berdimuhammedov had raised Afghanistan, where stability and reconstruction was important not just for Afghanistan itself, but also for the entire region. The United States was working hard with the Government of Afghanistan and its multilateral partners to resolve security issues, strengthen the government and borders, and control narcotics trafficking. For example, the United States was seeking to build roads. He also noted that there was an opportunity to provide more energy to northern Afghanistan, and the United States hoped to facilitate contacts between the governments of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan.

18. (C) Berdimuhammedov responded that, in discussing electricity sales to Afghanistan and the TCP, there so far had only been "words and theory," and asked, "Where is the reality and the practice?" Urging Feigenbaum to attend the one ton heroin drug burn the next morning, he said that all the drugs had been seized along the Afghanistan border over the last two months. Also regarding Afghanistan Berdimuhammedov:

-- Agreed that highways were important for establishing contacts, and stated that he wanted to help build roads in Afghanistan -- something he said he had not yet even told

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Meredov -- once Turkmenistan was finished improving its own roads;

-- Stated that the Government of Turkmenistan also wanted to provide "substantial" but an unspecified amount of financial assistance during Afghanistan President Karzai's July 5 visit to Turkmenistan; and

-- Said that Turkmenistan was willing and able to provide a 500-kilowatt electricity line to Afghanistan, but claimed that "you're moving slowly in Afghanistan." Noting that this proposal had been raised during the June 7-9 visit of Afghanistan's Minister of Energy, Ismail Khan, Berdimuhammedov said, "We're ready to do this."

18. (C) Feigenbaum stated that providing power to Afghanistan was important to the United States, which was willing to facilitate conclusion of a Power Purchase Agreement. It was also important to stop the flow of drugs between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan; in this regard, he noted that the attendance of both Berdimuhammedov and Karzai at the August 13 opening of the U.S.-built border crossing checkpoint at Imamnazar could offer an important symbolic opportunity to demonstrate both leaders' commitment to work jointly to accomplish this goal. Berdimuhammedov agreed this was a good idea and told Meredov to "start working on it," Berdimuhammedov thanked the United States for its work at Imamnazar, and urged that the United States, too, should participate in the ceremony.

Berdimuhammedov Pushes for More Educational Exchanges

¶9. (C) Commenting that he largely agreed with Berdimuhammedov's list of areas of potential cooperation, Feigenbaum added that the two sides needed -- and the United States wanted -- to move from words to action. For example, there were slots in U.S. exchange programs, such as Fulbright, that remained unfilled. And, while the United States wanted to increase the number of slots for FLEX (high school) and UGRAD (university) exchanges, it was important for UGRAD exchange students to be able to maintain their places in their home universities so that they could return and enrich their country with what they had learned. Berdimuhammedov dissembled on this point, responding that he wanted to increase the number of exchange slots, especially for teachers and professors, since many needed to requalify in their professions. (Comment: The Ministry of Education both complains that the UGRAD program does not give enough opportunity to local university students, selecting students already studying overseas instead, and also actively prevents the local university students who are chosen from returning to their home universities. End Comment.)

¶10. (C) Feigenbaum noted that there was much more the United States and Turkmenistan could do. For example, Berdimuhammedov had said that he wanted to see more U.S. companies active in Turkmenistan, yet the challenge was to attract foreign firms and to create a legal, business and regulatory climate attractive to business; Feigenbaum promised when Turkmenistan's Minister of Economy and Finance, Hojamyrat Geldimyradov, visited Washington in July for the annual TIFA conference, the United States would seek to provide him with a good set of bilateral meetings.

Human Rights: We Need to Agree to Disagree

¶11. (C) Feigenbaum noted that, like many Americans, he saw politics and economics as being closely linked. Strengthening the rule of law was as important for promoting economic development and trade, just as it was important for encouraging democracy. Berdimuhammedov shook his head, saying that he did not agree. Politics was "theoretical" in nature, while economics was "practical." There were differences between the two.

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¶12. (C) Berdimuhammedov said that, with regard to energy, it did not matter who purchased Turkmenistan's gas; his country only wanted to sell gas at its border to develop economically. "We are looking at this from a practical point of view; you supported diversification, and we're now doing it." If Turkmenistan came up with additional reserves, the president added, those reserves could be sent to Afghanistan in the form of electricity assistance. Both this and the TCP were economic, rather than political, issues.

¶13. (C) Feigenbaum explained that in trying to promote a multidimensional relationship, the United States was interested in energy, economic development, security, and cooperation and transnational issues, but it also wanted to see human rights advance simultaneously with other areas. Although the United States recognized that not all areas could advance at the same speed, all were important and needed to move forward. The United States and Turkmenistan had many new opportunities that had not existed before. The United States wanted to develop these opportunities, therefore Secretary Rice would welcome a meeting with Deputy Chairman Meredov in Washington for additional talks.

¶14. (C) When Feigenbaum asked what messages Berdimuhammedov wanted him to take back to Washington, Berdimuhammedov responded that the two countries' general vision was the same, "we only disagree on approach." In some areas, the two might have different visions, but in general, he wanted to resolve issues and make the differences into a positive.

Feigenbaum asked whether Berdimuhammedov was surprised that the United States talked so much about human rights; the president repeated his notion of "one vision, different approaches." Feigenbaum emphasized the need to be candid about differences in a spirit of partnership. The United States was concerned about freedom of media and religious belief, and civil society in Turkmenistan. But he hoped that, by agreeing to talk openly about their differences, the two countries could turn this into a constructive area of their relations. That said, areas of difference should not prevent progress in areas of agreement.

¶15. (C) Berdimuhammedov suggested that the two sides agree that they had differing positions on democratization, then claimed "we have democracy. There are limitations, but these exist everywhere." The real problem, he continued, was that those who violated the law today claimed tomorrow that their rights had been violated. Reform needed to be gradual, the president said, and he agreed that the differences should not influence overall cooperation. Feigenbaum asked whether it would be more useful to have exchanges involving these issues such as parliamentary and police exchanges and Berdimuhammedov agreed. Training exchanges, including on legal issues would be very useful. Turkmenistan wanted to see exchanges involving the whole block of judicial/law enforcement bodies, including officials from police, Ministry of Defense, border security and judges. There had been some contact, but it was insufficient. When Feigenbaum suggested that more exchanges in this area could narrow differences, Berdimuhammedov nodded in apparent agreement, but added that this was another area where Turkmenistan's mentality might be different from that of the United States for some time to come.

Berdimuhammedov to Visit the United States?

¶16. (C) Feigenbaum asked whether Berdimuhammedov was thinking about attending the UN General Assembly opening session in September. The president, waffling for a second, looked over at Meredov, who said "Yes, you should go."

Comment

¶17. (C) As Meredov subsequently reiterated in a subsequent meeting with Feigenbaum, Berdimuhammedov wants to continue expanding relations with the United States (indeed, Meredov

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later told Feigenbaum, the president almost never repeats himself twice; the fact that he did so repeatedly on the issue of cooperation demonstrated the president's commitment, he claimed). Berdimuhammedov's apparent naivete on issues such as how to move forward on a TCP demonstrates a gap between the vestiges of Niyazov-think ("if you build it, I'll agree") and his understanding of how a modern state should operate. Meredov's optimistic take on the meeting indicates Berdimuhammedov's reliance on his more experienced foreign minister to tell USG visitors what the president really meant to say. Berdimuhammedov's obvious dependence on Meredov to set his foreign policy and cast him in a favorable light means a Meredov visit to Washington will offer a unique opportunity to help him help Berdimuhammedov dig Turkmenistan out of the cave Niyazov created for his people. End Comment.
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